

ROUTING AND RECORD SHEET

SUBJECT: (Optional)

Research on Propaganda Analysis Methodology

FROM:

Acting Director, Foreign Broadcast
Information Service

EXTENSION

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FBIS-0254-88

STAT

DATE

14 November 1988

STAT

TO: (Officer designation, room number, and building)

DATE

OFFICER'S
INITIALS

COMMENTS (Number each comment to show from whom to whom. Draw a line across column after each comment.)

RECEIVED

FORWARDED

1. ADDS&T

Jim:

2. DDS&T (FYI)

This is [redacted]
methodology paper that I
briefed during last week's
Monthly. I think most of
her findings and proposals
will have some long-term
gains for FBIS (and maybe
the analytical community at
large). I hope you and Evan
find it as interesting as
I did.

STAT

/s/
AD/FBIS

31 October 1988

MEMORANDUM FOR:

Chief FBIS Analysis Group

STAT

FROM:

Special Assistant for Methodology

SUBJECT:

Research on Propaganda Analysis Methodology

From July 1986 to September 1988, under the sponsorship of the Exceptional Intelligence Analyst Program, I investigated the theory and practice of propaganda analysis for intelligence purposes. My research was aimed at accumulating material for a study that would: survey the history of propaganda analysis in the Intelligence Community, primarily within the Foreign Broadcast Information Service (FBIS); examine propaganda analysis methodology, appraising various techniques used inside and outside the government; and offer recommendations for new approaches to improve analysis and utilize the full potential of automated data systems.

My research as an Exceptional Intelligence Analyst followed three basic tracks:

(1) I explored the history of FBIS analysis to determine how our methodology was developed and identify experiences that might point the way to the development of new, more effective analytical techniques.

(2) I investigated contemporary academic sources, in the social sciences in general, but particularly in the field of communications studies, to determine whether work outside the government might help inform and improve our work.

(3) I sought insights from less directly related fields--psychology, philosophy, semantics, etc.--in an effort to develop a more fundamental understanding of how propaganda analysis works and the reasons for its explanatory power.

In my new position, as a Special Assistant for Methodology in the FBIS Analysis Group, I propose to use the results of my research to formulate methodological guidelines to deal with the growing diversity in communist media, conduct experiments applying computer technology in FBIS research and analysis, investigate ways FBIS can help analysts cope with an overload of material from media sources, and draft training manuals and basic research reports that will assist analysts inside and outside FBIS. I also would like to expand contacts with scholars who can offer insights and assistance in all these areas.

This report reviews some of the highlights of my findings and suggests some of the specific projects that will result from my research.

REVIEW OF EXCEPTIONAL ANALYST PROJECT

FBIS History

I discovered that the history of FBIS analysis--spanning nearly 50 years--can help us today to understand our work and do it better. Without my research project, much of that history and the lessons it contains would have been lost. Some of the key documents I tracked down had not been unearthed before and might eventually have disappeared entirely, and many of the people I interviewed will not be here to tell their stories in a few years. By identifying both the changes that have taken place in FBIS analysis over the years and the remarkable continuities in the work and the experience of the Analysis Group I was able to develop a much clearer understanding of our analytical methodology and its application in different situations.

Past experience is helpful, for example, in meeting the present challenge created by the growing diversity in communist media, particularly the changes in Soviet propaganda under the policies of glasnost. Similar problems of creating and evaluating techniques to analyze different propaganda systems were faced at the outset when FBIS analysis began in 1941 and they arose again in 1947, when FBIS began post-war analysis of Soviet media. The impact of changes in Soviet media on analysis was also faced before under similar circumstances during Khrushchev's rule. As one former FBIS analyst recalled, Soviet media behavior in 1956 caused FBIS analysts to speculate whether they would soon be out of work. Instead they found that their systematic examination of the media was even more important under such changing conditions. Strategies to meet our current challenge, particularly techniques to help identify new rules and patterns governing the media, can be found in documents from these earlier periods and in testimony in interviews with the analysts themselves.

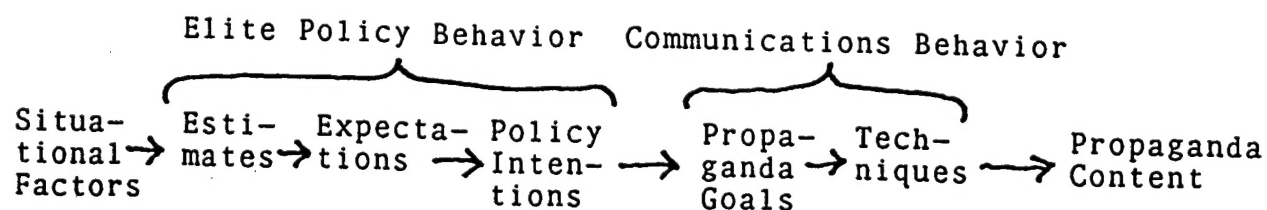
During the 1940's propaganda analysis was a central subject for research by scholars in the burgeoning field of communications studies and FBIS analysts were pioneers in the field. Analysts in FBIS examined not only the controlled media of totalitarian states, but also the less restricted media of allied nations, an area of study that we did not return to for many decades. Their need to break new paths was reflected in their eclectic experimentation. A handbook for analysts compiled in 1942 noted that analysts could employ "any method of analysis which produces results which are useful to policy makers. . . . Content analysis, ideological analysis, political interpretation, semantics, all have their place."

It was a period of very basic exploration. Harold Graves, who headed a radio monitoring and analysis project at Princeton University before he was brought to Washington to organize FBIS, recalled in an interview that he had no idea how to begin to analyze foreign propaganda until someone suggested that to be scientific the analysts should classify and quantify. After applying this advice, analysts soon began to identify propaganda patterns and draw inferences from the broadcasts without the counting. Although serving as the Senior Administrative Officer in FBIS, Graves continued his involvement in analysis in FBIS--reviewing the weekly analytical report and writing its introductory summary.

Some of the FBIS analysts were influenced by the content analysis techniques of Harold Lasswell, who headed a parallel analytical effort at the Library of Congress. Lasswell's quantitative methods were found to require too much simplification and to be too cumbersome to use under the tight deadlines of current intelligence analysis, however, and were not assimilated into the FBIS methodology. A complex coding and counting system developed within FBIS by Harvard psychologist Jerome Bruner and others during the early days at FBIS was also abandoned. One of Lasswell's colleagues noted years later that although the approach of the FBIS analysts was "much more intuitive" they had "considerable success" in anticipating German actions.

Hans Speier, who came from a propaganda analysis project at the New School for Social Research to head the FBIS Analysis Division's German section, developed many of the concepts that are still successfully applied today, including the requirement that analysts classify and differentiate between levels of authority in commentary. He found the roots for his approach to propaganda analysis in the work of another refugee German scholar, Leo Strauss, who--in a 1941 essay, "Persecution and the Art of Writing"--explained how to read between the lines of texts written in repressive environments.

The work of the World War II German section was evaluated in a study, published in 1959, by one of the wartime analysts, Alexander George. By comparing inferences drawn by FBIS analysts with revelations in captured German documents, particularly the diaries of German Minister of Propaganda Goebbels, George concluded that the analysts had been accurate in 81 percent of their inferences. His study provided a simple model for FBIS analysis that can still be used today for the study of any controlled mass media:



The analysts, George explained, used their detailed knowledge of past media behavior to reason backward from the content of broadcasts to infer the propaganda goal behind it and then to account for the goal in terms of elite estimates, expectations, policy intentions and/or situational factors. No comparable study has been published examining the work of FBIS analysts who studied the media of other countries during World War II or the specific techniques--files, coding, indexing, etc.--that they used.

By the mid-1940's FBIS analysis had been all but abolished by budget cuts and Congressional efforts to restrict FBIS's mission. At the same time, communications scholars moved away from the sort of propaganda analysis done by FBIS and focused more on the effects of communication rather than the intentions or circumstances that prompted it.

In 1947 the FBIS analysis function was revived with analysts concentrating on the examination of communist media. FBIS analysts were again among the pioneers in developing techniques in this field. Along with analysts in the Foreign Documents Division (now Production Group), they played an important role in recognizing early signs of the conflict between China and the Soviet Union and made major contributions to the analysis of Soviet leadership politics. A new model for deciphering communist communications was offered by FBIS analyst Myron Rush, in a book published after he left FBIS, who hypothesized that the Soviet elite communicates in the media with sub-elites through the use of "esoteric communications"--"texts whose deepest meanings can be grasped only by a part of their audience."

During the first postwar decade analysts in FBIS also developed most of the valuable research aids, including the Key Theme and Elite Statement files, that still provide an indispensable foundation for our analysis of the media. At the same time important management decisions were made that helped establish the Analysis Group's unique potential to systematically exploit communist media, including the creation of the Research Staff, with its disciplined files to support the entire office, and the institutionalization of the Group's role in guiding FBIS's collection effort in key areas.

Academic Research

Increasingly following World War II, FBIS analysts' contacts with the academic community concentrated on area studies programs. The growing field of communications studies had little impact on our work. My survey of academic research in communications sciences suggests that FBIS would benefit by renewed contacts with this field from which we grew. Fortunately, there is also increased interest in propaganda studies among many communications scholars, reflected in the publication of new texts on the subject and the establishment of a new journal devoted to it.

Communication studies offer both potential models to assist us in refining our methodology and experiences in the use of computers in research that might help us in our new automated environment. The following examples are only suggestive of the areas where we might usefully focus attention:

--In refining our methodology and developing strategies to deal with changes in communist media we might learn from models offered by Hans Speier after he left FBIS. For example, in an essay first published over a decade ago, entitled "The Communication of Hidden Meaning," Speier systematically examined several of the kinds of communication that propaganda analysts commonly have used to derive intelligence judgments, including allegories, messages calculated to impart different meanings to different audiences, writings using contentious historical symbols, and silence or omissions. Drawing on a broad range of examples--from literature, history, psychology, and philosophy--he demonstrated the general relevance of such forms, not only in communist countries. According to Speier, "in preliterate and literate societies, and particularly, though not exclusively, in illiberal regimes; among those who wield power as well as those who live under its sway; among victims, critics, and detached observers--in all of these circumstances and all of these groups we encounter efforts to convey hidden meaning to certain recipients."

--Leon Festinger's concept of cognitive dissonance--demonstrating the human inclination toward consistency in actions and communication--provides a theoretical basis for assumptions FBIS analysts make about media behavior and its relationship to policy and intentions. Festinger's ideas help explain why propaganda tends to reveal the source's policy decisions, even though the source is aware that its words will be analyzed for intelligence purposes. His model is relevant to understanding a wide range of behavior--from the flood of self-justification that followed the Soviet shootdown of the KAL passenger plane in September 1983 to the tortuous course of CPSU policies toward Stalin and his legacy. Turned on its head, the theory provides a basis to look at propaganda not just as a tool for the policy maker, but also as a set of belief statements about the world that will constrain the policy options of the state that initiated the propaganda.

--Similarly, Kurt Lewin's concept of the "gatekeeper," focusing on the processes that determine what material is carried by mass media, can help us construct research strategies to identify the rules governing Soviet media practices under Gorbachev. In order to be able to draw inferences about media behavior in the new situation, we must define the instructions or implicit rules that are applied by the media gatekeepers in selecting and rejecting material.

--Other communications studies, on diffusion of innovation and new information technologies, for example, can help us understand the problems faced by Gorbachev in his drive for reform and modernization and the development of new information policies. Familiarity with academic literature on the implications and impact of Western nations' transformation into "information societies" can help us understand Soviet discussions of the same transition in the USSR.

The Methodological Model

In the final segment of my research I attempted to understand and clarify the conceptual framework that allows analysts to make valid political inferences from the media. In approaching this issue I wanted to resolve several problems I had encountered as an analyst that I thought might have a common source: Why was it so hard to teach new analysts how to do their job and why were some never able to learn? Why, when we drew conclusions from the media that seemed "obvious" to us, was our evidence often unpersuasive to some of our consumers? How could I explain the role of the standard tools that AG needed from FBIS to do its job--a defined, consistent data base of elite statements, for example--in such a way that it would be clear that their maintenance was not an unjustified burden on collection resources? Why are FBIS analysts using the sole source of propaganda frequently more successful in drawing correct inferences from the media than all-source intelligence analysts? Propaganda analysis, while demonstrably effective as an intelligence tool, seemed to involve a way of looking at the world that was not common or easily explained or accepted. Why?.

A conceptual model to address my questions was provided by Richard Wich, in his book Sino-Soviet Crisis Politics, in which he makes a distinction between analysis of media content and context. Wich explains that contextual factors define the meaning of political messages, and that all relevant intelligence evidence--political signals--is "constituted by both the communication as such [the content] and the context in which it acquires its operative meaning." In Wich's terms, propaganda analysis was not content analysis but "contextual analysis."

I found intriguing support for this approach in a communication theory associated with psychological studies, by Gregory Bateson and others, that produced the double bind explanation of schizophrenia. The theory posits that all communication contains within it two orders of information--content and relationship--the equivalent of Wich's content and context. The content of communication (words or actions) cannot have meaning outside of a frame of reference (the context or the relationship in which the communication takes place). The

context can be viewed, in Bertrand Russell's terms, as a different Logical Type than the content; it is communication about communication or metacommunication. Errors in interpreting communication tend to develop when the metacommunication is misunderstood or ignored. The hardest job an analyst faces is to correctly identify the context of the propaganda.

These two levels of communication can be seen clearly, for example, when their confusion creates a paradoxical situation, as in the injunction "Be spontaneous!"--where the content contradicts the context/metacommunication.

The two levels are also apparent in humor, as illustrated in this cartoon, in which the bank teller deliberately ignores the frame of reference or context that the bank robber is attempting to impose.



Everyone analyzes their personal interactions using both aspects of communication, but the analysis of the context is normally done unconsciously. We are unaware of our analysis, at least as long as we do it successfully. For example, if someone tells us to "go jump in a lake," we note the person's hostility (the metacommunication or context of the words) and do not harbor any illusion that we have been asked to go swimming. We are not analyzing the words, but responding to other contextual signals that tell us their meaning.

Harold Graves offered a similar commonplace example in explaining FBIS analysis to Congress in 1944:

Let us suppose, for instance, that young Junior has been in a fight. We ask him who won, and he replies that Jimmy, his opponent, didn't fight fair. We know without any further questioning that Junior lost the fight. In much the same way, when the German radio circulates atrocity propaganda, it is a possible indication that the military situation is unfavorable.

The problem with these examples is one we still face today. The congressmen would understand the first example because they shared unconscious assumptions about the context of the conversation with the young boy. They would not necessarily draw the same inference from the second example, however, unless Graves made its context explicit, perhaps by citing previous instances in which German media used allegations of atrocities to draw attention away from battlefield losses.

Similarly today, analysts infer the contextual half of a communication by looking at past practice to find patterns that provide clues to the context of the message content. Thus, when the Chinese Foreign Ministry in 1971 issued the 496th "serious warning" denouncing an alleged intrusion by a U.S. plane into Chinese airspace, an analyst could safely assume that no retaliatory action might follow, since that had been the pattern following the 495 previous such warnings since 1958. By contrast, in December 1978, when a check of AG Research Staff files revealed that Chinese warnings to Vietnam contained threatening statements that had not been used since the Chinese invasion of India in 1962, it was not rash to anticipate the Chinese incursion into Vietnam that occurred two months later.

Returning again to my questions, with this two-part model of communication in mind I reached several tentative conclusions and recommendations:

--It is hard to teach analysts to apply techniques of propaganda analysis because its most important aspect--the identification of context--is normally an unconscious function and has received little explication as part of the research process. Training of analysts should focus specifically on this function and we should bear it in mind in our recruiting and testing of potential new analysts.

--Our consumers are naturally unconvinced by our conclusions when they do not already share our assumptions about the communication context. We should address the question of context more directly in our analysis.

--We should also be clearer and more explicit in explaining our collection requirements and how contextual analysis must have a large, complete, systematic data base to allow the analyst to identify explanatory patterns. At the same time, we should make sure that analysts are well trained in the use of these resources.

--It is not surprising that analysis of the media alone is often the best way to understand the context (and therefore the content meaning) of communications, since the context is, by definition, embedded in the communication itself. It must be unearthed through the systematic examination of past communication, the search for patterns that can be done nowhere as well as in AG.

In addition, I have come to suspect that the particular mental perspective that allows analysts to "see" contexts where others do not is fairly unusual and may have some relevance to what has come to be known as the AG "culture." In my study of FBIS history I was struck by the unchanging nature of this culture, manifest since 1941 in the antibureaucratic, democratic spirit of the office and in an undeniable history of misunderstandings or conflicts between AG and other components.

My hypothesis was buttressed by studies of personality types described in a book by Donald MacKinnon, one of the psychologists who was a part of the World War II OSS Assessments Staff, tasked with assessing the qualifications of new recruits. In similar research after the war, MacKinnon found overwhelming evidence to demonstrate that individuals involved in work such as that of FBIS analysts--the creative identification and solution of difficult conceptual problems--consistently display a combination of rare personality traits that cause them to see problems where others don't. MacKinnon notes this attribute probably explains the unpopularity of such individuals, since "a constantly questioning attitude is not an easy one to live with."

FUTURE PROJECTS

As the AG Special Assistant for Methodology I propose to undertake a series of projects that will utilize my work in the Exceptional Intelligence Analyst Program to define and expand propaganda analysis techniques, examine the recent changes in communist media behavior and their implications for propaganda analysis methodology, create training aids for analysts, and suggest ways in which automation can be used to augment and improve intelligence analysis. The outline below identifies general areas which I would like to investigate and possible reports that might result from my work.

1. Implications of Glasnost: Analysis in New Circumstances

Propaganda analysis in the Intelligence Community has focused primarily on the government/party-controlled media of totalitarian regimes. The traditional analytical methodology has assumed that inferences can be drawn from these media about leadership intentions and policies because the media are controlled by the leaders and used by them as purposeful instruments to advance their policies. As a consequence, deviations from established propaganda themes have been interpreted as signals of a change in policy, controversy over policy, a reaction to a change in circumstances, or an alteration in propaganda tactics.

As communist regimes in the Soviet Union and elsewhere allow or encourage the expression of greater diversity of opinion in their media, and controversial or anomalous media commentary becomes more commonplace, the assumptions and application of this analytical approach have been called into question. The answers to these questions can be found in a program of research on Soviet media practices built on the assumptions of the model of content-contextual analysis outlined above and an examination of the history of FBIS experience in analyzing less controlled media.

As a first step, I propose to draft a report (or series of reports) that would attempt to define the new rules that govern Soviet media content and behavior. In addition to examining Soviet media for evidence, I would review past AG publications for citations of propaganda techniques that appear to be part of the new pattern and would encourage analysts to be more explicit in the future about their assumptions about what hypothetical rules might guide the media in specific situations. The resulting reports would be comparable to ones written in AG in 1949-1951 that laid out fundamental assumptions about Soviet media behavior that were necessary to provide the context for analyst inferences.

Separate reports could be written drawing lessons from our experience with the analysis of other communist media, such as those of Poland, that have been relatively diverse for several years. The special cases of FBIS analysis that did not deal with typical controlled media--particularly the analysis of allied propaganda during World War II and several years of experience with the analysis of Middle East media--can also provide case studies to address the methodological questions raised by glasnost. It might prove useful, in a second phase of study, to review that experience in a separate report on the applications of propaganda analysis.

2. Annotated Bibliography: A Resource for Analysts

During my Exceptional Intelligence Analyst project I have identified a wide range of academic literature from many scattered sources that could be valuable for intelligence analysts examining the media. So that this material can be of general use, I propose to produce an annotated bibliography covering such topics as the history of FBIS analysis, propaganda analysis methodology, related methodologies drawn from other fields, applications of communications studies to propaganda analysis, and applications of computer technology to communications analysis.

3. Tools of the Trade: Guides to FBIS Research Tools

FBIS analysis rests on a foundation of carefully structured central research files. The files, maintained by the AG Research Staff, extend over a long period of time--covering 40 or more years of communist public statements in some cases--and rigorous guidelines ensure their accuracy and completeness. They are tailored to help analysts overcome the problems presented by the size of the FBIS data base and ensure that we can respond rapidly and accurately to new developments, particularly in crucial foreign policy areas. Without the structure provided by the central files it would be unrealistic if not impossible to provide well grounded evaluations of Soviet public statements in some areas--for example, on defense and disarmament issues--where Moscow's track record extends back over several decades. Other files, such as the commentary lists, provide raw material for more technical examinations of Soviet and Chinese media behavior and propaganda strategies.

FBIS analysts need to have a thorough understanding of these files and how to exploit them and must have close interaction with the Research Staff to ensure that analytical needs are efficiently met, particularly during a period when new challenges are presented by changes in communist media and FBIS is dealing with resource pressures and the problems and opportunities that come with the transition to automation.

To facilitate such cooperative interaction and encourage the maximum utilization of our research resources I propose to produce a series of reports on the major segments of the AG research data base. Each report would provide background on the origin and evolution of the file, its role in our methodology, and examples of its use. Taken together, the reports, supplemented by descriptions of other holdings and including information on new automated files, could be used as a handbook on AG's research resources. No such handbook has been published for 30 years.

The reports could be used for training analysts in the use of the files and would provide background for making decisions on automation and resource allocation. In addition, such a systematic explanation of the files would be a necessary first step to support any future program to share the files in automated form with other offices in the Intelligence Community. By providing Community analysts access to our structured data base, FBIS would facilitate search and retrieval on important issues and make a valuable contribution toward solving the problem of information overload.

5. Automation: Aiding the Transition to the New Environment

Automation will provide Analysis Group with powerful new tools, but there will also be problems as we adjust to the system and adopt new approaches to our work. As Special Assistant for Methodology I will monitor the impact of the transition on our work and attempt to develop strategies and recommendations that give us the maximum benefit from automation. In addition to observing analysts' use of the new system, I would like to investigate certain specific processes--such as the production and exploitation of the Commentary Lists--where automation may have the greatest potential for streamlining and improving our work. I also would like to evaluate possible strategies to provide greater assistance--through automated files or indexes--to analysts outside FBIS as well as in AG.

4. The History of FBIS Analysis: Learning from The Past

While addressing the current needs of media analysis, inside and outside FBIS, I would like to continue work begun during my Exceptional Intelligence Analyst project to write a history of the development of government propaganda analysis. The story has never been chronicled, although the history of FBIS analysis now stretches back nearly 50 years. Many lessons are buried in the past that should not be lost--much time and money can be wasted if we are unaware of the work that preceded our own--and the history can provide perspective and inspiration to young analysts. I will need some additional interviews to complete this project, but I have finished most of the research that would be required. I would like to complete my study in time for the 50th FBIS anniversary.